

2008

# Open your eyes...On impressing the important things.

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OPEN YOUR EYES...ON IMPRESSING THE IMPORTANT THINGS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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May 2008

## Acknowledgement

Mine is a collaborative world and my most trusted collaborator is my dear husband, Daniel, without whom I would be lost. Also deserving great thanks is Dr. Noreen Barnes, Glynn Brannan, Karl Green, and Randy Mercer who have kept my head above water and my soul intact. I also need to thank my students, who went on this adventure with me and who shared a bit of their lives with me. I would not be here if it weren't for the great love and support of my family and dear friends and the teachers in my past that showed me the way. I owe a huge debt to Michael and Nina Vought who first believed in me and opened my eyes to the world of costuming. I would never have made it this far without their guidance in my undergraduate years. Finally I dedicate this thesis and my teaching to the memory of Marilyn Scharine, who was the kind of teacher I can only hope to be.

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## Abstract

Open your eyes...on impressing the important things

By Heidi D. Ortega, MFA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2008

Major Director: Dr. Noreen Barnes

Head of Graduate Studies, Department of Theatre

Open Your Eyes... On Impressing the Important Things is the documentation of my first semester as a Graduate Teaching Assistant. The purpose of this thesis is to document that journey to gain greater understanding of myself and my teaching. I embrace teaching as an artist. It is an opportunity to inspire and empower. As a teacher, I am attentive to the fact that learning is a complex process. It is individual, content and context specific. I believe that the goal of teaching is to empower students to take responsibility for their learning. Teaching is an art form that can be inspiring and can cultivate the courage to grow intellectually, to encourage the student's curiosity, and to provide opportunities to ignite action.

In this thesis I will detail my journey while teaching my first semester of costume construction, a 100 level, technical theatre class at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). I wish to explore my growth as a teacher while working as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA). I will explain how I came to be the GTA for this class and how it has helped me to view myself, my teaching, and my life. I will chronicle the growth the class and I underwent that first semester and how it shaped me for the semesters to come. I will discuss the changes I made that did not work and were discarded. I will look at my teaching style and how it has developed through the teaching of this class. I hope with the writing of this thesis to gain a deeper understanding of myself as a teacher and as a student of life.

A general requirement for all theatre majors, costume construction (THEA 104) is taken during a student's freshman year, thus, I have the opportunity to influence these student's ideas and impressions of VCU and help them to collect the tools that will ensure their success at college. Many of these students have no idea what to expect of the college experience, and for many of the students it is a shock to the system. I hope to help them see where their place is at college, in the department and within their major. Most of the students are not costume majors and this will be their first introduction to the technical side of theater. I have attempted to create a class that is not just a sewing class, not just a class where students regurgitate information; but a class that changes a student's view of the world. I do this primarily by changing the way a student looks at the basic things they use everyday. The tools I use to open their eyes are familiar to them; we have all been

‘costuming’ ourselves for years. I take these familiar items, their T-shirts, hoodies, and jeans and show them a new way to look at them. As an artist, the greatest tool is your inner eye - the one that makes you see things differently than most people. I hope to open this eye in my students. They will no longer put on their jeans without seeing the seams and the zipper, and appreciating the work that went into them. They have a new understanding of their T-shirt and hoodies not just as something that is “comfortable” but why a knit fabric makes it that way. This reaches far past a class focused on theatre. Mine is not a class that goes through the motions, one of absorption and regurgitation, it is a journey, and with each class the path changes but the destination remains the same: to learn how to learn. Through the changes I have enacted I hope my students take with them skills they can use outside of class and school, skills to be used in their everyday lives.



## **Chapter One: How Did I Get Here?**

I came to VCU with the goal to become a college professor. I was already a teacher – I have been one for most of my life. It is what I have always wanted to do. I know not all teachers are born into it, but for me, it is something I have always been. The ages of my students and the subject matter have changed and evolved over the years, but my identity as a teacher has remained the same. I chose VCU because of its focus on pedagogy and the fact that I would have the opportunity to teach every semester as part of my assistantship.

Before I arrived at VCU I had spent the previous year teaching at Glendale Middle School. Glendale gave me my first opportunity to have a formal classroom all to myself, with goals and objectives that I had created for myself and the class. Glendale is known as a 90/90/90 school, that is: 90% poverty, 90% minority and 90% illiterate. My class was Calligraphy, an art class whose goal was to reinforce the letters the students learned in their Reading and English classes. It was a crash course in classroom management and the seed from which my teaching philosophy sprung. After Glendale I was a much stronger, and more focused teacher but I wasn't fooling myself – I was no expert on teaching, I knew that I had much to learn about teaching. However, I didn't want to be taught how to teach, I had discovered in my undergraduate education that I had very little patience for that. My first years of college were spent as an early childhood education major. My goal was to become a Kindergarten teacher. The major reason I changed majors was because of the teachers in my education classes. I wasn't interested in becoming like them, yet that was

how the curriculum was structured. We were to teach exactly the way that they told us to, with little room for our own personalities. What I was looking for at VCU was a deeper understanding of myself, and the reasons why I teach. I believed that through a greater understanding of my own process I could become the kind of teacher I wanted to be.

The act of teaching allows me to access the creative instincts that I have. These instincts and my way of teaching are a manifestation of the way in which I experience life. I believe that teaching is an art form; it is the act of adapting and assimilating to the human condition. The beginning of each class for me is much the same as a painter staring at a blank canvas. For me, teaching is a collaborative art form – I am not the only artist, the entire class contributes to the creation. Each day creates something wholly new and unique. Art is a form of survival, it allows for self-expression, and it should be used as a technique for understanding. Teaching is a way of translating the beauty of knowledge and of learning into a kind of collective consciousness. Those in the classroom influence each other in many subtle, yet powerful ways, and our collective wisdom and creativity can be harnessed and used for the common good. Teaching is an art that offers conversation. It can transcend human reason, and is a sharing of imagination that embraces the past, the present and the future. I want to infuse my students with the love of learning, to awaken the desire to understand their world, to see it with newly opened eyes and to understand that learning occurs in every moment of every day – it is not something that begins and ends at the classroom door. Through the subject matter of costume construction I believe I can open the world of learning to my students and this thesis details my attempts to do just that.

## Chapter Two: In the Beginning

I am just one in a line of many Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTA) who have taught Costume Construction (THEA 104) at VCU and although undocumented, they have all undoubtedly left their mark on the class. I arrived on campus the day before classes and began to search for my classroom. Feeling much the same way the incoming freshmen must, I became lost. I felt sure the room had to be here and yet it wasn't. I was in the basement of the performing arts building and there were no signs to help me in my quest. I tell this story because it illustrates the fact that I was no different than my students – we were both new to all of this. The classroom was the Theatre Department's costume shop, a multi purpose room that serves all the needs of the costuming department. This room is also a common hangout for students, lending to a mildly chaotic atmosphere at any given time. THEA 104 is a three credit hour class that runs Monday through Friday for two hours a day. It consists of two sections one from two pm until four pm and the other from four pm until six pm. These are independently taught by the Costume GTA's; the class is capped at eighteen students because there are only eighteen sewing machines.

As I was the new girl in town I was given the four pm until six pm time slot, with the assurance from Chris Mueller (my fellow GTA) that I would rotate to the two pm until four pm slot and back from semester to semester. Karl Green, the shop manager showed me the book that would serve as the text *The Costume Technicians Handbook* by Rosemary Ingham and Liz Covey. I was familiar with the text, but had never actually read it. I inquired about a syllabus, was there one? I was quite nervous about the whole thing;

my only frame of reference for the class was a Costume/Makeup class that I had taken during my undergraduate years at Westminster College more than seven years ago. Needless to say, I didn't remember anything about it! Karl showed me my "drawer" a space where I could corral all of my stuff. Every costume major had one and the GTA's were given two of these filing cabinet drawers so they could have one dedicated to the THEA 104 class and all the paperwork and stuff associated with it. Karl told me he would look for a copy of an old syllabus so that I could use it to create one for myself to use this semester. I was very concerned about being prepared for class tomorrow but I was getting the distinct impression that it didn't really matter whether I was prepared for tomorrow's class or not. It seems to be common for the first day of class to be a "free" class, a throw away. Teachers and students have somehow come to the conclusion that although it is the first day of class, there is no point in starting on that day. This has always confused me, both as a student and now, as I am learning my new role of teacher. I am not going to say I haven't taken advantage of this, as a student you can get away with anything on the first day, late? No problem. No book or notepaper, or even a pencil to take notes? It will be ok. I would argue that 90% of teachers on the first day of class distribute the syllabus and call it a day. I don't have an actual statistic but I know that as a student, it is a shock and an unwelcome surprise if your teacher actually expects anything to be accomplished that day. This of course, was working in my favor for how could I be prepared to start the class, to lecture, or demonstrate tomorrow when I have yet to receive any information about what the class entails? I knew tonight I would be spending my time creating a syllabus for the class, and I hoped that I would have an example to follow.

While hoping that Karl would find the information to help me create a syllabus for this class and wanting to spend sometime studying the text, I deposited my purse into my 'drawer'. Inside the drawer was a black three ring binder, stuffed with papers. By this time I was alone in the shop, and had no means of discovering the owner of the binder. Taking it to the desk and opening it, I could see immediately that I had struck gold. The first page in the binder was a syllabus for the very class I had to teach tomorrow! Flipping through the pages quickly, and feeling kind of guilty, I could see this had been the folder of a previous teacher of THEA 104, there was no name to be found on the folder and I began to think it had been left on purpose for me, or who ever the new GTA would be. If this were the case why had Karl not directed me to it, so that I could prepare for class tomorrow? Had it been left on accident? I instinctively knew that I needed to copy the information contained within as quickly as possible. Not knowing if I should be privy to this information, I felt nervous and a bit like I was cheating. Like I had found the teachers test key for the final exam. I began to read through the information and try to get a sense of what this class was about, what exactly was the mission of the class?

On the first page of the syllabus it listed the course objective as:

"This class is designed to teach you the basics of machine and hand stitching. These skills will be used in building, altering, and repairing costumes and accessories for the Theatre VCU productions this semester. The class will orient you to the workings of a theatrical costume shop."

While this clearly stated the goal of the class, that it was to teach "basic" sewing and that this skill would be used to help build the costumes for the productions to be mounted that semester it

didn't answer my question, it only raised new ones. Having taken "slave" craft as an undergraduate, I was familiar with the common practice of using freshmen as laborers in the sweatshop of production. Is that what this class was? Was this class not interested in the learning the students gained, just in what they could produce? Being new to VCU, and unfamiliar, yet, with the type of department it was, I couldn't answer that question.

I believe that there are two basic types of theatre departments in higher education:

1- A department dedicated to the education of its students, focused on the development of knowledge and skills in the students so that the students may succeed as theatre scholars, designers and practitioners. This type of department creates students who, because of the diversity of their education, could also succeed if they decided to do something other than theatre in their future. 2- A department that focuses on production, its needs driven by the box office. Classroom pursuits were to be inline with the current show, education for the sake of education was not important. The bottom line was all that mattered. I am now in my last semester here, at VCU, and I have discovered that VCU is, unfortunately, type #2. It is a department focused on "professional training" and this is especially true in the undergraduate program. In the debate of product vs. process VCU is interested in the product. This is not the type of teacher that I am, or was interested in becoming. But back to the task at hand, what was the intent, the mission of the THEA 104 class? Taking the information that I had learned from the old syllabus and comparing it to the rest of the documents in the folder I concluded that the mission of the class was to both teach the students how to sew and to try and transmit as much information about costuming as possible to the students. The class was laid out with military precision and what seemed to me to be an excessive amount of tasks each day. (Appendix A)

Within the binder I found lecture notes, quizzes and exams which gave me a good understanding of the teaching style of the class. Remember, I was still operating under the assumption that this binder did not belong to an individual, but instead acted as a resource for the teachers of the class. With the small bit of knowledge I gained in my one year as an education major I understand that the class was based on what Paulo Freire called the “banking” method of teaching, in which the student is viewed as an empty account to be filled by the teacher. It was assumed that the students had no knowledge of the subject before this class and that the teacher (me!) was the source of all information. While there is a need for a certain amount of “banking” at the beginning of a class, especially for those who have little to no background in the subject, I am not an advocate of this style, and therefore this added another level to my growing anxiety. I have knowledge of the subject, I have been sewing since I could hold a needle and I am here at VCU getting my second masters in costume design but I don’t claim to know everything. In fact I tend to avoid people who do claim to know everything. I find that teachers who take that stance alienate their students and do themselves a huge disservice! My moments of greatest learning have not been in a classroom, it is the time in between; the time that I am exploring new surroundings and information that I find my learning and comprehension is at its greatest. Was I expected to teach the class the same way as the others had? I was aware that there were two sections of this class and I felt it was safe to assume that a sort of conformity was expected, but to what degree? It wasn’t that I was opposed to attempting this style, I was just wary of my success at it. I naturally wanted the section that I was teaching to be the “best” class, the class that made students not want to miss a day and of course, the class that they learned the most from. I have never thought of myself as particularly competitive,

but I do spend way too much time worrying about what others might think. I was the underdog here, I had no idea what to expect tomorrow and Chris had already taught two semesters, one full year, of this class. How could I ensure my success? Was there a way to do that?

When Karl returned I asked about the binder and he was as surprised by it as I had been. He thought it must've been left by Heather, who had graduated that spring. He told me I was welcome to it and if she wanted the binder she would be back for it. The binder, and information, wasn't, as I had assumed, a resource for the teachers of the class, it was the work of a former GTA who had left it by mistake. For the sake of clarity I will now refer to the binder as Heather's, even though I didn't know for sure whether or not it was in fact hers. With this knowledge I felt both relief that I didn't have to follow the class style outlined in the binder, and an urgency to copy the information so I could have it if I needed it. Interesting, that I both didn't want to use the information – there was something about the way it was laid out that grated on me and yet I felt the need to have it as a backup plan, because I still didn't know what to expect when the class actually started. With each passing minute I was becoming more and more grateful for my experience at Glendale. The confidence that I gained there is the only thing that kept me sane that day. Karl is a very nice man, but he wasn't much help at all in easing my worries or answering my questions, he just kept telling me that it wasn't a big deal and that teaching the class was “easy”. Not knowing what else to do – I copied the syllabus verbatim, only changing the dates to reflect the fall 2006 semester. That done, I put the binder into my backpack (couldn't risk Heather coming back and taking it) and went home to study the textbook.



### **Chapter Three: The First Day of School**

It is now the first day of class, and while I had kind of grumbled about having to teach the late class I am now realizing what a lucky break this is! Because I am teaching the second section I can watch Chris during his class and really see what I am expected to do. I breathe a great sigh of relief and grab a notebook to record how Chris teaches the class. I was curious to see if Chris's syllabus was a replica of the one I had stolen from the binder or was his unique to him and the way he taught the class? Would his goals be the same as the ones I had outlined in my syllabus or would I be left adrift because I had followed Heathers goals? As usual, my fears were completely unfounded. Chris's syllabus was an exact replica of mine. Despite this, he maintains that he was the sole author and that he didn't have any information to assist him in creating it. I couldn't imagine how that could be, and told him of Heather's binder. He seemed disinterested in it and implied that he had never had such help. He explained his introduction to the class much the way mine had been, only without the help of the binder. This led me to another worry – was I somehow lazy or stupid because I had used the binder? Should I have done as Chris said he did – make it up on my own? While this thought whirled in my head, I tried to reassure myself that it simply wouldn't have been possible to make it up. Chris might not have had something as tangible as the binder but he must've had assistance, it would've been impossible otherwise.

Looking towards the door to the room, I begin to see people entering. They pause at the doorway and seem unclear as to where they should go. At that time the shop had a “sewing circle” a sitting area just inside of the shop with several threadbare, but comfy chairs

surrounding a coffee table. After entering the room, the students would stand nervously by the door and then they would migrate to the sewing circle and sit down. As more and more students entered the room the chairs filled up and they were chatting with each other, joking around, and the volume in the room was now quite loud. This was the strangest beginning to a class I had ever witnessed. Perhaps now is a good time to draw a picture in your mind of the complete layout of the room. Just past the doorway to your right is an empty bookcase and immediately to your left is a small hallway with an industrial grey door at the far end. This hallway comprises VCU's craft area. It contains a sink, small plywood cabinet and a washer and dryer running the length of one side and a low counter top running along the other. As I mentioned earlier, past this hallway on your left is the sewing circle. Looking straight ahead while standing in the doorway you see four tables in rows each with four sewing machines on them. Past these, and it is quite a distance, you can see the end of the room and a large, old steel desk with a computer. If you look past the sewing circle on the left, you can see several rolling racks for hanging clothing, a large table overloaded with a strange assortment of things and a large brick column in the center of the room. It isn't until you walk past the column that you can see what the "classroom" part of the shop is. It is a large table set in the center of the room with stools surrounding it. It was impossible for these students to know where they needed to be, and unless they were brave enough to venture far into the room they wouldn't even see the table. Although Chris was sitting at the table he made no signs to the students to join him. I was much too unsure of myself to do anything but sit at the desk with my notebook, and observe the activities. Class was scheduled to commence at two pm and it wasn't until a few minutes past two that Chris

sauntered over to the sewing circle and told everyone to “come to the table”. I was surprised by the way he said it – as if they should have known that was where they needed to be.

They quickly grabbed their bags, coats and food and followed him to the table. I am the type of student who has always followed the Boy Scout motto “always be prepared” yet I was amazed by the amount of stuff these eighteen students had with them! Once they had settled onto the stools their stuff was on the floor, filling the only available space to walk. I felt that this had immediately become a safety hazard. Chris began, as most of us do, with attendance. This has always been a source of anxiety for me, the first impression students have of their new teacher is of them fumbling over hard to pronounce names. At Glendale, because of the high refugee population at the school, the names had been especially hard. It wasn’t until Chris began taking roll that I realized I had no idea how to find my own class roster! I hadn’t been given any paperwork that told me where to look for this information and no one else had given it to me. Luckily all I had to do was ask Karl and he was able to provide me not only with a list of those registered, but a printout of their ID photos! This was amazing, what a great resource for teachers. I had him do this for me with each class I taught; somehow he even had access to classes I taught outside the Theatre Department. It was my cheat sheet – and helped me to learn the students names much quicker. Chris was distributing his syllabus and explaining to the class that since they all knew how to read, he wasn’t going to read it to them. This leads us back to what happens on the first day of classes and to a discussion of how teachers tackle the introduction of the syllabus differently. I think that if you aren’t going to have a ‘real’ class anyway, you should at least spend the time going over the materials in the syllabus with the students. My definition of a ‘real’ class would be that the teacher begins to teach the subject, by

lecturing or demonstrating, whatever is appropriate. Distributing the syllabus, taking roll and dismissing class are not a 'real' class. The syllabus is the foundation of the class, and like any foundation it is vitally important to the success of whatever it might be holding up. The approach that Chris took is not uncommon and it was not the first time I had heard the excuse of "you know how to read" as a reason for not reading the syllabus aloud to the class. I think it is safe to assume that if the teacher doesn't read it to them, it may never get read at all. You might think that this is because I think students are lazy, or apathetic to the class, but that is not the case at all. As a full time student they are forced to prioritize everything, if you as the teacher don't make it clear that something is important then the students won't think it is important either. By reading the syllabus to the class and encouraging questions and a discussion you emphasize the importance of the syllabus to your class.

After the syllabus distribution Chris directed his students to "grab a basket". At the far end of the classroom, just past the filing cabinets (or "drawers") I had been given to put my stuff in, was a bookcase filled with plastic baskets. Each student was to receive a basket, place his or her name on it and inside were a few sewing supplies. A pair of scissors, tailors chalk, tape measure, needles and a seam ripper; this was where they were to corral all their costuming projects. The syllabus said that today there would also be a shop tour, and I had been looking forward to that myself, as I was completely unfamiliar with the space. Unfortunately I discovered that the tour consisted of Chris pointing out where everything was without leaving his seat. I can understand why he did this, the thought of leading eighteen students around the room and into the craft area is a bit overwhelming and it is all in one room so pointing does do the job. I guess. With the 'tour' done class was dismissed and I had quite a bit of time to study

my notes from Chris's class and to ask Karl a few questions that had come to light while Chris was teaching.

Since I had been present for Chris's class, I assumed he would be present for mine and because he hadn't lectured today I felt pressure (only from myself) that I shouldn't either. I didn't want today to be a throw away class though so I decided that I would read the syllabus to them, attempt to have a real tour and perhaps do some name learning games. I think learning your students' names is one of the most important things a teacher can do to influence whether or not your students are invested in the class. If you know your students names they feel important. It is simple human vanity. We all desire to be around people who make us feel good about ourselves. A teacher who can make their students feel like they matter to the teacher is more likely to have students who are eager to please them. This is not to say that you should heap praise and fawn over students, which can have the opposite effect. When I began teaching middle school I had many teachers tell me the old rule of "don't smile until after Christmas". I found this was a rule I couldn't follow, smiling and an outwardly positive demeanor is a big piece of how I define myself. However, I don't think that a teacher should be concerned about being friends with their students. It is a working relationship, and too often by being a friend you lose the ability to guide, and to teach. I believe this is an area that I need to work on, I am a friendly, outgoing person and I am unsure of whether my students see me more as a teacher or a friend.

I looked up from my notes and saw the first of my students entering the room, he looked at me and I gestured for him to enter and move towards me as he did, I directed him to find a place at the table. I continued this as the students entered the room, until there were enough

students around the table and it would be obvious to those entering where they should be. I had been reading the book, and the binder, and the first lecture wasn't scheduled until the following Monday. That lecture was on chapters one and two of the text. Chapter One in the text is a very thorough look at an 'ideal' costume shop and I hoped that I could possibly sneak in a lecture during the tour of the shop. My thought was that although I didn't want them to take notes today – I wanted them to be on their feet and walking around, the information would be in their head and hopefully a week from now when I revisited it, it might be familiar information. After Chris's class I had asked Karl about a location for the students' backpacks, coats and things and he had told me that was the purpose of the empty bookshelf just inside of the door. I planned on instructing them to move their items to the shelves before I took roll, as soon as they had all arrived. I was sitting at the head of the table and just like you would find in a traditional classroom, and naturally the students filled in the spots furthest away first. I had noticed in Chris's class that it was a tight fit around the table, and the last four students in his class had needed to sit away from the table, in front of the sewing machines. I didn't like this, the table is tall and with students seated all around, it is difficult to see the students who were sitting at the machines. Although I wouldn't be doing a demonstration today I knew I needed to establish the idea that we all needed to be around the table – on the first day of class many rules are established. Some of these rules you point out and talk about and others are the unspoken ones, the first impressions, and perception of the teacher and the classroom. I needed to demonstrate that it was indeed possible to sit all 19 of us around the table, so that when it was important (for demonstrations, lectures) they wouldn't balk at the idea and perceive the space too small. Before class began I had counted the stools to ensure that there were indeed enough, I thought that

perhaps that was why those students had sat away from the group in Chris's class. But that was not the case, there were twenty stools and I had placed them orderly around the table. This order naturally disintegrated with the students arrival, the stools were pushed under the table, were used to hold bags etc. With a quick count I could see they were all here and I hollered for them to be quiet. The ability to quickly quiet a rowdy classroom is imperative when teaching middle school and although I am now dealing with adults, I have found it just as useful at University. Once quiet, I pointed out the bookshelf and instructed them to corral their stuff on its shelves and return to the table, I made sure to point out that all of them could fit around it, and needed to do so.

I hadn't realized that I would sweat so much! I was so nervous, and unsure of what I was doing, and what I should be doing with them but I didn't anticipate the physical reaction. It was as if I was experiencing a hot-flash – could they tell? Was I about to become the red-faced, sweaty teacher? This was something that I hadn't remembered from Glendale, and I wondered if I had been as nervous there. I was acutely aware that now all of my students were adults; they (or their parents) were spending a lot of money to sit in MY classroom! This wasn't the same as Glendale where I knew that most of the students didn't want to be there – and it had nothing to do with me. No one wants to be in Middle School! Because of this I always tried to make my classroom a safe zone, a time of the day when they could feel a little freer and hopefully set aside the stress of just being thirteen and surviving each day as it came. This was different all my students at VCU had chosen to be here, both at the school and in my classroom; they could've registered for Chris's time slot, or chosen to take Stagecraft first. But they had not, they had picked me and I felt a little bit like the girl who got picked first for the volleyball team

(something that never happened in real life) and I found myself being swept up in this feeling. My need to show them they had done the right thing in choosing me was powerfully strong and quite overwhelming. I realize now that I was (and am) naïve, but I will get into that later. I called roll and save for one crazy mess of syllables I managed to do it right.

Reading over the syllabus with the class, I realized more clearly than ever, just how much I didn't know. To help understand and gain perspective I will provide a small glimpse into the past: I have been sewing as long as I can remember, I have an MA in Costume Design and Production and yet I felt deeply inadequate to teach these students what was outlined in the syllabus. Many of these things I had never attempted to do myself. I didn't really enjoy sewing until recently. Growing up, the fact that my mother was an accomplished seamstress was a bit of a sore point with me. All I wanted was to be like the rich girls around me and purchase my clothes at the cool stores and walk around as a breathing billboard for designer labels. Unfortunately for the adolescent me, my mother's response to most of these needs was "I can make that for you" she didn't seem to understand that that was not the same. She spent a lot of time embroidering tiny alligators on shirts and inserting zippers into the ankles of my jeans, while I made stencils that said ESPRIT so I could paint the label onto the book bag I had made. I made the occasional dress or skirt for myself but wasn't very interested in it until I reached college and found myself the costume designer for a show set in the '80's. After this show and with each one thereafter I gained a greater appreciation for what my mother had been doing for me. She taught me everything I knew, but I had never had a formal sewing lesson, so how was I to teach a sewing class?



According to the syllabus that I was now reading aloud to the class, I was to spend this week teaching the class hand stitches and the names for most of them were completely foreign to me. Again, I was grateful that I had the later class section. This was going to allow me to study what I was to teach, and have a preview of how to teach it each day before class! When I got to the part in the syllabus about the textbook I was dismayed to hear my students tell me that the bookstore didn't have it and they all wanted to know what they should do. Chris hadn't gone over the syllabus or mentioned the text, and this was a surprise. Not having an answer for them, I told them I'd check into it and let them know tomorrow. With the syllabus read, it was time for the tour. I allowed them to sit while I pointed out the sewing machines and all the objects close to the table but as I began to talk about the other side of the room I instructed them to get up and follow me. I think that Karl thought I was nuts as I herded them towards the other end of the room and the craft hallway. I hadn't fully anticipated how difficult it would be to keep all of their attention while I showed them the objects to be found in a costume shop. There were several moments of embarrassment when one of the students would ask about something and I was unable to answer what it was – because I had no idea myself, the biggest one of these was while we were crammed into the craft hall way and a student inquired what was behind the door, I reached out to open it and found it locked and I had no idea what lay behind. By the end of the tour I realized why Chris had just pointed to things rather than walk around, it was impossible with eighteen students, and in the end, I don't think any more instructional. With all of that done, time was up! I couldn't believe that two hours had flown by so quickly and I was disappointed that I hadn't managed to sneak in the lecture as I had hoped. As the last student left I realized how exhausted I was, I hadn't done anything and yet I felt like I'd been hit by a truck. The next

day I was determined to be more aware of the time and to budget it wisely so that I could get through everything I had listed on the syllabus. I had no idea how long these things would take to teach, I hadn't even learned them myself yet. My gut told me that there was too much stuff packed into each day but I had no way of knowing whether or not this was true.

When I talked to the bookstore about my lack of a textbook they told me it hadn't been requested and therefore, not ordered. It didn't matter that this class had two sections taught every semester and had been this way for years! Apparently, I was supposed to have placed an order for these books before school began (before I had any knowledge of the class) so that they would be here in time for the start of school. I could place an order now but it would be several weeks until they arrived. This was my first time dealing with the bookstore, and I didn't know it then, but I would have this same trouble each semester, whether I ordered the books or not. How can I expect my students to be prepared the first day of classes when the bookstore isn't even prepared? This is a problem that needs to be fixed. I can understand why the bookstore won't order books unless they know they will be used, while at the same time I wish there was an option for an instructor who uses the same book each semester, every year, year after year to have a standing order. I am confident that mine is not a unique problem and I found that it didn't matter if I called near the end of one semester to order for the next, or I waited until two weeks before the start of the semester, whether I called, or walked over there personally, the books wouldn't be there for the first day of classes. I think this problem could be solved with a simple computer generated email at the end of the semester. The email would inquire if books that instructor used this semester would also be needed the following semester and

to please place the order now for any additional books needed. It would be simple for the teacher to hit reply and say yes or no, and take care of it when it was convenient for the bookstore. As huge as VCU is, I cannot believe that something like this isn't already in effect. In cases such as my class, where the individual instructors are graduate students and therefore the instructor is constantly changing, the email would simply go to the coordinating faculty member, in the case of THEA 104 that would be the director of costume design or the shop supervisor. The only solution I found to this problem was to encourage the students to recycle the textbook with their friends or purchase one online. Neither of these helps to have the students be prepared for the first day but it was all I could do.

## **Chapter Four: We Begin with Only a Needle and Thread**

I studied the book and practiced the stitches I needed to teach for the week and this made me feel better, for most of the stitches were intuitive for me and there were only two I was having trouble mastering, but they were to be taught at the end of the week. I knew I had plenty of time to practice and if need be, ask Karl for help. Watching Chris's class each day definitely helped me to have a better idea of the way to phrase things. Sewing is a hands-on, visual thing and it is very difficult to explain in words alone how to accomplish a task. Never having had a formal sewing class myself this was something I hadn't thought about but I had discovered that myself when I was reading the textbook. I felt anxiety that I as the teacher didn't understand what the book was asking me to do with each stitch. It wasn't until I had observed Chris demonstrate to his class that it became clear. Another problem I was running into was the fact that there are many different names for the same stitch. Part of my initial confusion and anxiety was because I didn't recognize the names of the stitches, when in fact I did know how to execute them; I just called them something else. How do I demonstrate to eighteen students so they can all see and understand? Should I tell them all the possible name variants so that they might not be confused, or would this just confuse them more? The assignment was a hand sewing sampler, and I spent a moment romanticizing myself as a young woman, learning to teach at a 'normal' school, where training in the industrial arts would be mandatory. A short history lesson to put my fantasy in perspective: It was well into the twentieth century before the domestic

sewing machine was firmly established, and this naturally led to the consequent decline of hand sewing. Before the sewing machine, needlework was an important part of a girl's school curriculum all through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. It was in 1798 that a school in Boston first recorded the teaching of sewing. (Murdoch) Young women, who were either training as pupil teachers or were at a Domestic Science College, would be expected to produce work of an exceedingly high standard, and, in turn, to teach their own students. The samplers they produced are works of art. By the 1920's the making of samplers was almost completely abandoned. Today, learning how to sew rarely means using a needle and thread, it is all about the machine. One of the biggest draws for me in costuming is that it is helping to keep many dying arts alive, if only barely.

As I watched Chris demonstrate the first of the hand stitches I could see a few things that I didn't want do. The first stitch taught is a Running, or Basting, stitch which is thought to be the simplest stitch and a good one to learn the basic skills you will need for all the stitches, such as: How to thread your needle, how to hold the needle, how to knot the thread and how to puncture the fabric. Students must also be trying to have precise and equal stitch length and to keep the stitches in a straight line. Each student received a 24inch square piece of muslin to create their samplers on. Chris had his students draw a pencil line on their square of muslin with a ruler for a guide to keep the stitches straight but I didn't like this. I don't like the idea of starting the students off with a handicap; they wouldn't be able to draw a line on a real garment so why allow them to do it now? Also, how could I grade them on the ability to stitch straight if all they had to do was follow the line? He also demonstrated at the head of the table, with regular thread, on the same muslin square given to all of them. Curious, I walked to the other end of the

table to see if the thread, and stitches, was visible to me. If I strained my eyes I was able to see them, but it was not easy. I thought perhaps if I used yarn to demonstrate the stitches they would be more visible to the students who were sitting far away from me. I knew that we had a bin of yarn I could use; I just had to discover if we had a needle with an extra large eye. Karl told me where to look, but unfortunately the shop didn't have any needles large enough to accommodate the yarn. It seemed that each time I had an idea that went contrary to the norm; it didn't work out for one reason or another. Perhaps I should just do things the way they were always done. I didn't want to admit defeat on the second day of class, but I was already tired of being shot down. I resolved to use this semester as an experiment. I would teach the class the way it seemingly had always been, with only minimal changes to allow for my personality and style of teaching. I would keep notes about what I wanted to change and the probability of the success of those changes. I wanted to be able to reinvent the class for next semester and have better insight as to whether the changes would work or not.

Despite my best efforts to be clear in my instructions I spent most of the second day of class circling the table, demonstrating again and repeating the instructions to every other student. This was exhausting and took up so much of the class time I wasn't able to teach as many stitches as Chris had. Chris's method was much easier on the teacher: he demonstrated once and stayed sitting, if the students needed further instruction he would repeat what he had said earlier and demonstrate again, without leaving his seat. He allowed the class a small chunk of time to complete the task and then he moved ahead whether the students had completed the task or not. As an observer of his class I got the impression that it didn't matter to him if they actually succeeded in doing the stitch or not. The students' anxiety level in his class was high and it was

appearing that the quality of the stitches wasn't. Even though Chris's method was much easier on the teacher, I didn't agree with the sink or swim methodology he seemed to have. I had a personal investment in these students; I thought my job wasn't just to teach the class, but to have the students learn. Shouldn't that be the goal of all teachers, A universal goal that spans across different subject matters and departmental policies, and curriculums, the goal to teach our students how to learn? I can see that teaching this way is going to take a lot more time than I have allotted in the syllabus and how can I compensate for that? Is my class going to feel like the slow class because the other section moves at a faster pace? It seems that with each day of teaching my list of questions grows longer and longer and I still have no one to answer my questions. The only responses to my questions are a brush off: don't worry, it'll all work out, it's easy... None of these help me. So I do the only thing I can, I keep moving forward (although much slower than Chris's class) and hope it will all work out in the end. This is a difficult path for me, I like to be able to categorize and organize things, to have concise answers to my questions, even if I don't like the answer, because then I know how to move forward.

I make it through the first week and although we are one day behind, Chris cancelled his class for Friday and I did not, which made us even again. I very much feel like I am in a race with Chris. I am still exhausted at the end of class, but my nervousness (and sweating!) has significantly decreased. I think the students are learning, they seem to be at least. I feel confident that if I had my students attempt the stitches they did on the second day of class again they would be able to execute them well, and be proud of how far they've come. I hope this next week is easier, I will be teaching them the sewing machine, and unlike the hand stitches I know how to use this – I am confident that I can

answer any questions they might have. The machines of course are much more intimidating to learn and I hope that none of my students are going to be afraid to try. I have found a disturbingly large amount of students with a defeatist attitude, the notion that they know they can't do something, even though they've never tried. As a teacher in the arts this is a common problem. When is it that we all decide we can't do something? Who is it that tells us we can't draw, or sing, or dance, and so we decide to stop doing it – even though it was previously something we loved to do? And we let this idea carry through into adulthood, far past the time when we stop letting people tell us what to do, we still hang on to the notion that we cannot do something, simply because we can't master it the moment we try to do it. As children most of us loved expression, loved to sing and dance and color everything! Why do we have the idea that we must stifle this to become adults? This attitude makes a teacher's job so much more difficult. We all have to deal with students who don't want to be in our classes, who have no interest in the subject, but it is the students who are interested, but too afraid to try, so scared that they will fail they won't even allow themselves to learn, that should propel us to new levels of pedagogy and to finding a way to reach those students.



## **Chapter Five: Here Come the Machines!**

Chris suggested that I take half of his class today during his machine demonstration. I thought this was a great idea; it would be much easier to demonstrate to nine students than eighteen, my only concern was that I had planned on observing how he demonstrated so I could better teach during my class. I had been doing this everyday before my class, but I guess today I was going to have to make it up as I went along! I had photocopied and enlarged a few sewing templates I had found in the Ingham/Covey textbook (194-195) (Appendix B). These would help establish the need for straight, even stitching. Although I was against drawing lines for the hand sampler I saw these templates not as a crutch but as a challenge. There were four templates in all: ranging from simple straight lines, to a scallop, and a full circle. The ability to sew in a curve is essential, as not all seams are straight. My idea was that the students could sew the templates on Monday, without worrying that they would be graded on them and then on Tuesday begin the machine samplers, the things that they would be graded on. The problem with this plan is that there wasn't time for these templates in the syllabus and this would put us behind at the very beginning! Falling behind was a constant concern for me, I didn't know what to expect in the future so I had no way of knowing if it would matter or not that I wasn't able to accomplish the tasks I set forth in the syllabus on time.

Chris liked the idea of the paper templates, and I was hopeful that perhaps this would be the first idea I'd had this semester that would work. Even with only nine students it was hard for them all to see me at the machine, I had them surround me on all sides but this meant that some were looking at the back of my machine. Luckily the tables were all set up with four machines

each, two on each side, back to back. This meant that the students, while not looking at the machine I was operating, could still see the knobs and dials I was talking about. Chris and I were at opposite ends of the room and this allowed us to talk with out overlapping each other and leading to confusion. The main thing the students needed to remember was how to thread the machine. If they did this incorrectly the machine wouldn't sew and would just create big, hairy knots. As usual Chris took half as long as I did explaining, and I worried that this was a reflection on me but once the students started sewing it was fun to watch them. Some were naturals and some struggled, but I think everyone had a great time sewing the paper. They were all relieved that they wouldn't be graded on them and laughed when I suggested they take them home and put them on their fridges, or send them home to their parents. I had assumed that because I had helped Chris with half of his class, that he would help me. Chris had yet to stay during my class, and to be honest I was happy about it, it would've only made me more nervous to have someone watching me teach, but this was different. Luckily, as Chris left for the day, Karl told me he would help me and take half of my students. It was great, and it was especially successful for me because I had been able to have a 'dress rehearsal' of what I was going to say just before class. I wasn't nervous at all when demonstrating for my class; I had worked that all out on Chris's. Having the opportunity to teach the very same demonstration within a few hours of each other was great for me. It gave me the opportunity, immediately, to change the things I wanted to. I could rephrase and include information that I had forgotten in the earlier demonstration. I left my class that day feeling really good, and not as exhausted as the previous week.

Each day I would observe Chris's class and then teach mine and each day I became more and more comfortable in the differences between our two classes. I talked more, and spent more time demonstrating, this is what was holding my class up. That was the reason Chris's section always seemed to be a day or two ahead of us. My hope was that my way of making the demonstrations more of a conversation was both more enjoyable for the students, and that they would be able to retain the information. After the first day of machine work the students seemed excited to sew on fabric and complete the different samples, with the hand sewing samples, they hadn't needed to use the irons but that changed once we began the machine sewing. Non sewers are quite surprised by how much ironing and pressing takes place when constructing something of fabric. The lecture that I had given on Tuesday went over this and the major safety concerns of the shop. The costume shop at VCU has three industrial, gravity feed irons.

The previous shops I had worked in had used domestic irons and I had never seen, nor used, an industrial iron. The operation is basically the same but there are very important differences. Most domestic irons that are available today have a safety auto-off option which is one of the worst things to happen to sewers in a long time. With these auto-off irons you constantly have to turn them back on and wait for them to heat up. Not only does this dramatically cut into production time, it is also hard on fabrics. Silk in particular is sensitive to water stains and if you are impatient for the iron to heat up you will be rewarded by the iron "peeing" on your fabric, thus ruining it. If the temperature of the iron is too high, it will melt synthetic fabric and if it is too low it will not press as well as you need. It is crucial to have a reliable temperature and steam release on any iron that's primary function is for use in sewing. The introduction to these irons I consider one of

many crucial ingredients I was missing in my education until I arrived at VCU. I had been taught to iron by my mother, it was one of many chores I was expected to do. Over half of my class raised their hands when I asked “who has never used an iron before?” I could rant for pages on this but that is not the purpose of this paper, nor would it arrive at any solution to what I see as the death of home education. Students no longer have an option for this in secondary or high school, but what is more troublesome is that it is also not happening at home. However I could remedy that today and I did so. By the end of this semester my students will understand ironing better than most drycleaners. The first thing the students needed to learn was that it was not the iron itself that was likely to burn them, it was the steam. Most college freshmen are smart enough not to touch something they know is hot, but the steam is much hotter and much harder to see. They also needed to understand what I was asking them to do when I said to “press” vs. when I said to “iron”. Pressing is just what it implies: using the iron to press down on the fabric, while ironing is the back and forth motion most people attribute with an iron. The week we spent on the sewing machine samples, both learning how to operate the machine and familiarizing them with common sewing tasks the students began to realize that using the iron was at least fifty percent of the job.

## **Chapter Six: It's a Mans World: or At Least His Shirt**

The third week of classes they began their first big project, to construct, from start to finish, a man's shirt. I was surprised and intimidated by this project, I had only ever made one man's shirt, and I didn't feel that I had been particularly successful at it. Like with the hand sampler, I would be teaching myself how to do something just before, or during, the time I was trying to teach my class. The one part I was particularly worried about in the shirt construction was the collar. With the shirt I had constructed previously, the collar had not lined up correctly, and I wasn't sure where I had gone wrong. I was concerned that I would instruct all my students incorrectly and none of their collars would line up. As a teacher, I am expected to know more than my students, and to be able to help them be successful in the tasks I have them do. I felt that a man's shirt was a hugely ambitious project for beginning sewers to tackle and I worried that they wouldn't be successful. Years before, Karl had taken many steps to help the freshmen be successful at this project. He had taken a commercial pattern for a man's shirt, a pattern that claimed to be a "two hour shirt", and traced all of the pieces onto oak-tag, eventually having two patterns in each size, ranging from extra small to extra large. Since instructions included in commercial patterns are notoriously difficult to comprehend, even for experienced sewers, he rewrote the instructions to be more user friendly. This however, doesn't mean that they were now easy to read or comprehend. Sewing has its own vocabulary and this makes understanding instructions difficult. Many people also have difficulty seeing things three dimensionally in their minds and therefore struggle to see how the pieces will come together. During the two weeks of instruction and construction of the "two hour shirt" the hardest thing for the students to do was

to try and not think ahead. When you construct a garment you do so inside out and often, upside down, this makes it hard for beginners to really see how the step they are doing currently leads them to the completed garment. Despite my fears regarding the collar, many students did manage to sew theirs on correctly.

Most of my students had never studied their clothing as they got dressed, or undressed. With each step of the shirt construction I attempted to not only show them how it related to the final shirt, but also how this same step could be found in what ever they had worn that day. Though most of them wore jeans and a t-shirt like a uniform, even these staples of their wardrobes held clues to the project they were completing in class. I encouraged them to study their clothing, turn it inside out and try to visualize how it would've been constructed. Look at the people around them and really see what they were wearing, could they identify the seams I had taught them in class? I knew that if I planted this seed, then perhaps I could get them to open that inner eye, to see sewing in unexpected places and to consciously begin learning during every moment of their day. This was not an easy task, but I knew this, and was prepared for it to take all semester and I was aware that I wouldn't be successful with all of the students.

Repetition is the key. I would relate the information in class to their day-to-day lives every chance I had. My favorite moments in class are when a student has a story about noticing what type of button was on their coat, or the seam on a pair of jeans, or how proud they are when they say they were finally able to hem a pair of pants they'd never worn because they were too long. Those are my proudest moments, when I feel like I have given a student a skill they can use, something that will assist them long after my class is over, a skill that will help them in their everyday lives.

## Chapter Seven: Showtime!

Once the shirts were completed, the next project for the class was to help with the needs of the current production. VCU produces four main stage shows each year, two each semester. The first show of the school year is usually a small show where the costumes are predominantly purchased. This categorizes the production as a “shopped show” and one that requires little to no sewing on the part of the shop. The second show is generally much larger and requires many things to be built. It is this second show that the students of THEA 104 will help build. The show this semester was Medea, and the costume designer was to be Chris. He had designed the show with the understanding that many of the costumes would be built by inexperienced students. Among the many other responsibilities, costume designers for Theatre VCU have an obligation to the THEA 104 class. It is the responsibility of the designer to ensure that the students will have work to do. If the designer doesn't take this into account the purpose of the class suffers. If the costumes designed are too difficult for the freshmen, then the GTA's and the costume majors have more work to do and we must cancel classes so that we have the time, and the shop space, to do the work. This of course means that the students miss the opportunity to work on the show and since the purpose of the class clearly states that they will be working on the production, the purpose of the class cannot be achieved. In the case of Medea, Chris faced roadblocks in getting his designs approved and we were forced to cancel classes because we didn't have work for the students to do. All of my worrying about taking too much time on the assignments to this point turned out to be, as Karl had told me, no problem since we ended up canceling an entire week of classes. Once Chris's designs were approved, there were many costumes to construct, but not much time to do it. The production of a theatrical show is unpredictable and trying to tie the

formal structure of a class to the erratic nature of a show is bound to result in occasional problems. I was surprised that there was no emergency plan for this and I couldn't imagine that this type of situation hadn't occurred before. It seemed the only plan in place was to cancel class. Naturally the students didn't complain about this, and honestly at that point, as a student myself, I had so much work to do I found it a relief also. A relief, yes, but I was also disappointed. I enjoyed teaching the class and felt it was unfair to the students, and their education, to cancel class so casually.

When the students returned a week later, we were ready to set them to work in many different areas for the show. Not only were there costumes to be built, there were many alteration and several craft projects. Having this variety was wonderful, this gave every student the opportunity to complete something for the show, whatever their sewing ability. The most gifted sewers would have a garment to build; those whose skills were in the average range took care of the alterations and those for whom sewing was a challenge could handle the crafts. Everybody was able to have something and they were all very proud of whatever their task was. This variety of tasks was great for the students, but was overwhelmingly difficult for me. I felt like I was being pulled in a million directions at once. I spent each class running from one student to another, trying to keep track in my head what everyone's different projects were, and how to successfully complete all these different tasks. I was confident in my own ability to build any costume from scratch, even if I had never attempted that type of garment before, but figuring out how to sew something for myself to sew and figuring out how to sew something and instructing a beginning sewer to sew it were two completely different beasts. I found myself giving



incorrect information, all the time! None of my misinformation led to a tragic end, it usually just resulted in the student having to unpick whatever they had just done. Regardless, I was not happy with myself for giving the wrong information in the first place. Up until my time at VCU, I had little experience sewing without commercial instructions. I hadn't realized what a crutch the instructions were for me until now. Karl was an expert patternmaker and when he developed a pattern he didn't take the time to write out step by step instructions on how to sew everything together, it would be ridiculous if he did. But this meant that I had to make (fairly) educated guesses at each step of the process and when I guessed wrong, my mistakes were known to the entire class. I was being humbled everyday when I was forced to tell my students that I had instructed them incorrectly and that they would be the ones required to fix my mistake. Luckily Karl was present during nearly every class and if I didn't know how to do something he would step in and instruct the student. Karl never made me feel stupid for not knowing something and was constantly encouraging me in my attempts. By opening night I felt that my sewing ability had grown immeasurably due to all of the mistakes, and teaching opportunities the show had given me.

## **Chapter Eight: The Art of Lecturing and the Final Project**

I had been lecturing about once a week through this whole process. Each lecture was about an hour long and following a lecture the class would return to the project at hand, be it the machine sampler, man's shirt or the work on Medea. These were my, and most likely my students, least favorite classes. I loved demonstrating how to do something but I hated the role of lecturer. I could see their eyes glaze over when they turned into note taking robots. This was not the kind of environment I wanted in my classroom. Some of the information I lectured on was interesting but I was not an experienced lecturer or familiar enough with the information to be very good at it. I was using the information from the binder to lecture from and I was blown away by all the information I was to relay to the students. I felt that a lot of it was unnecessary. Why was it important for them to know when the sewing machine was invented? I began to take notes on what I thought was important and what I thought was unnecessary filler. The lectures where I could draw from personal experience and tell a story were so much better than the ones where I practically read from the notes I had found in Heather's binder. I was still observing Chris's class each time and unlike his demonstrations, his lectures weren't helping me teach my class at all. It seemed to me that Chris was reading word for word the notes I had found in the binder and not even trying to have inflections in his voice or stories to add to the information he was lecturing on. I knew that these lectures were just as important as the hands on part of the class. The purpose of the class was to teach the students how to sew and to give them an understanding of the costume shop. They couldn't gain this understanding without my imparting

information from the book, and from my experiences in costuming. I needed to find a way to make these weekly lectures more of a conversation, and less of a “banking” session.

The final project in the class was the one the students were most excited about. They had to make an outfit for themselves. As we as a class finished up the production work on Medea I told the students what the final project would be. Both sections of the class were going to put on a fashion show, on the last day of class, wearing an outfit they had made for themselves.

(Appendix C) Each semester Karl comes up with a theme that is general enough so that students can create nearly anything they’d like. This semester’s theme was “Back to the Future” because Medea had been designed in both an ancient Greek style and a Post-Apocalyptic style. This theme gave the students the leeway to make something that was in a retro or vintage style, or something that was more of a modern or futuristic style. I told the students they needed to have decided what they’d like their outfit to be by the coming Monday so that I could make sure it was within their sewing abilities before we went to the fabric store. On Monday, Karl gave an intense, two hour lecture on fabric and fibers, followed on Tuesday by a quiz that most people failed. Karl, Chris and I prepared the students to take a field trip to Hancock Fabrics on Friday. Karl lectured on what they would find at a fabric store, what they would see in a commercial pattern and how to measure each other so that they could purchase the correct size pattern. We needed to go to the fabric store on a Friday so that the students had time to pre-wash their fabric over the weekend and be ready to begin on Monday. They had to complete the entire outfit in three weeks. For some of the students this was going to be a huge challenge!

The field trip to Hancock was exhausting! I spent four hours walking around that store, trying to help students from both classes. Chris and I were there for the whole 2-6pm

time slot. I think that next time I will just station myself somewhere and make the students come to me! Most of the students in my class want to make 1950's style day dresses, the fashion show is going to look like a June Cleaver convention. I am very concerned that this project is out of control. I have a hard time imagining how these students who just learned how to sew are going to finish their projects in such a short amount of time. I was trying to think positively – I hadn't thought they'd be able to sew the man's shirt and everyone of my students had done a beautiful job with it. I was hoping that this was going to be the same, that in three weeks I was going to be amazed by what they had accomplished. And I was. The process of working on the production had increased the student's confidence and skill level greatly. It had also increased my own skills and confidence. As I mentioned, helping the students create the costumes for Medea was really challenging because there were no instructions to follow, or to help keep me on track. The final project was different, I still had to try and keep track of eighteen different projects, but this time I had a cheat sheet. I really wanted my students to read and attempt to follow the instruction that were included in their commercial pattern. My first response to a students question was "Where are your instructions?" I would then act as an interpreter for what being said in the commercial instructions. My hope was that they would be able to begin reading them for themselves, and if they ever wanted to attempt to sew something after this class was over they would have the vocabulary to do so.

## **Chapter Nine: It's over: What I Took with Me**

When the semester was over, the thing that stayed with me the most was that I hadn't given the students enough credit. They had surprised me at every turn with how much they were able to accomplish. The first two weeks were slow going but once they got into the man's shirt the learning took off! I consider myself an optimistic thinker, to the point of often being naïve. My attitude in this class had been the opposite: I had let fear and anxiety rule, and agonized at each new project that it was too much for the students. As I write this, I am reminded of my time spent at the International School of Beijing (ISB). I worked in a Kindergarten classroom and everyday in that room I was surprised by how much the students could learn. My experience in Beijing had shown me that the American public schools don't give their Kindergarteners enough opportunities to learn. In math specifically their learning is more about the vocabulary of math than the actual math. They only need to learn to count to twenty – in my ISB classroom the students were adding and subtracting three digit numbers!

I had a hard time accepting that I had allowed myself to have such a pessimistic attitude towards my THEA 104 students. Instead of rising to the challenge of this new information I spent the bulk of the semester worried that it was too hard for them! Luckily for me I had a wonderful group that first semester, if they had been a lazier group I would have perceived that my fears were true and would've probably made allowances for them. Instead they surprised me at each step and I was able to push them to greater heights of

understanding. These students gave me the confidence to teach this class for the next three semesters with the knowledge that what I was asking was indeed possible.

The format of this thesis reflects my feelings about that first semester: the first days seemed so long and were overwhelmingly full of information. With each new day and new lesson the days seemed to regain their normal speed until the moment of production when I seemed to enter warp speed. Chapters one through five are significantly longer than six through nine, and that is true to how I feel the pace of the semester went.

In the semesters that followed I made several minor, and one major, changes to the format of the class. I never again attempted to lead a shop tour but after I pointed everything out and explained what was around them I encouraged the students to take 10 minutes to explore their new surroundings. I ensured that the door to costume storage was open for them to view – no one would have to wonder “what is behind the grey steel door?” The second and subsequent semesters I did manage to have my first lecture on the first day of class, and I believe that it truly sets the tone for the class. Doing this clearly shows the students what was to come. I became much more confident in my lectures and was able to turn them into the conversations that I had desired. Each semester brought new challenges that I was able to overcome with lessening anxiety with each one. Although I continued to feel like I was in a race with Chris I gained the confidence that my class enjoyed my pace and weren’t concerned with what Chris’s class was doing.

My final semester of teaching this course I wanted to format the class differently. I saw the greatest challenge of the course was the amount of students in it. While eighteen students is not a large class, it did make individual, hands on instruction a challenge. I had

found that the best method for these demonstration moments was to split the class in half. Teach half of them while the other half waited and then switch. I was also curious about how much learning was happening during my lectures and whether or not the textbook was even being read. With permission from Karl, I broke up my class into two sections that were to attend class on opposite days. Group A would attend on Monday and Wednesday and Group B would attend on Tuesday and Thursday. The first semester I taught the course it was held Monday through Friday but the next semester Karl, Chris and I dropped the Friday and changed the course to a four day a week schedule.

My hope in breaking up the class was that they would be able to receive more individualized instruction and therefore learn more from the class overall. They would remain in their groups for the hand sampler, machine sampler and the man's shirt. I joined the groups for lecture and quiz days and for the production work and final project. I also changed the way that I lectured. I scheduled the quizzes before the lecture, forcing the students to read the textbook. I would lecture after the quizzes had been graded. This provided me with the opportunity to really focus on the things the class had done poorly on in the quiz and I hoped that the repetition of the information increased their retention. Ordering the lectures this way also made my lectures much shorter in length, helping us to stay on the same time frame as Chris's class.

While not a dismal failure, I wouldn't call my experiment a success. I believe the students enjoyed the smaller class size and enjoyed a bit of competition with the other group on each of the projects. It was much easier for me to teach this way, and it gave me the opportunity for a second try on any lesson, the very next day. As I had discovered in

my first semester teaching the course, it was immensely helpful for me as a teacher to have the opportunity to re-do my lessons and try them again immediately. Sometimes group A would get the best lesson and sometimes it was group B, I had staggered them so that group A wasn't always the ones to begin. I don't think however, it increased the students learning. I don't feel that my final semester students stitched better than the students I had that first semester.

This was true with the textbook vs. lecture learning as well. There was no discernable difference in the quiz scores between the students who had the more traditional method of lecture and quiz and the students who had to be quizzed on the textbook alone. What was different were my feelings toward the students. I felt a huge disconnect to them because I wasn't lecturing as much. I missed the lectures! I had begun to feel that they were not lectures, but conversations, and without them I didn't feel like I knew my class as well as I'd like. Because of this, I stopped that experiment after the first three quizzes and returned to my regular conversation lecture routine. I immediately felt better and I could also feel a discernable change in the atmosphere of the class. We all had a better rapport with each other because of the change.

I am glad that I had the opportunity to try these ideas out, if only to better understand the way I had already been teaching the course. I do not think however, that the students are better served by splitting the class into two groups. As I now transition from GTA into Assistant Professor I know without a doubt that it was the first semester of costume construction that fully solidified my future. The experiences teaching this course



confirmed my desire to teach costuming and to do so in a smaller department that would allow me to have the connection I desire with my students.

## **Bibliography**

### Bibliography

Hogg, Heather. "Costume Construction Syllabus." Richmond, VA. 2005.

Ingham, Rosemary, and Liz Covey. The Costume Technicians Handbook. 3rd ed.

Portsmouth, NH : Heinemann Drama, 2003.

Murdoch, Katharine. The Measurement of Certain Elements of Hand Sewing. New York City: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1919.

## **APPENDIX A**

Theatre 104  
Costume Construction  
Spring  
Instructors: Jenny Lappas and Heather Hogg

PHONE: Costume Shop 828-6025

Main Office: 828-1514

**Course Objectives:** This class is designed to teach you the basics of machine and hand stitching. These skills will be used in building, altering, and repairing costumes and accessories for the Theatre VCU productions this semester. The class will orient you to the workings of a theatrical costume shop.

**Required Text:** *The Costume Technicians Handbook* by Rosemary Ingham and Liz Covey. You will find the textbook in the VCU Bookstore.

**Attendance:** This theatre, like all theatres, is on a very strict production schedule. Therefore unexcused absences are not permitted. We all have responsibilities to every play each semester. Your role in the costume shop is just as important as the actor's role in the play.

**Attendance is taken at the beginning of each class.** The Department of Theatre policy allows a maximum of four absences before your grade is lowered one letter grade (failure to meet the attendance requirements can result in a failing grade). Three tardies constitute one absence. In addition, leaving class before cleanup and dismissal will incur an absence.

Missing class on the day of an "All Call" or the Fashion Show will result in your final grade being lowered one full letter grade. Examination make-up will be allowed only on the basis of a verified excused absence. Excused absences include an illness or serious injury requiring a doctor visit, a death in the family, or an approved University field trip or job assignment. Excused absences require written documentation.

**Grading:** Grades are based on Attendance, Attitude, Exams, Crew Work, Papers, Projects, Class Participation, and Weekly Quizzes. The instructor, based on the criteria listed above, determines your Final Grade. Late assignments are automatically lowered one full letter grade.

Hand Sewing Sample	50 pts		
Machine Sewing Sample	50 pts	<u>Grading Scale</u>	
Shirt	150 pts	1000 – 900	A
Paper	50 pts	899 – 800	B
Quizzes	100 pts	799 – 700	C
Midterm	50 pts	699 – 600	D
Final Project	100 pts	599 – 0	F
Final Exam	50 pts		
Crew Work and Class Participation	400 pts	*(Lab Hours are 150 pts of Class Participation)	
Total Points	1000		

**Labs and All Calls:** A minimum of fifteen (15) lab hours is required of all 104 students. Lab hours must be completed by the start of the All Call for the last show. In addition, one half of your Lab Hours must be completed by the Midterm.

All Calls are mandatory and are scheduled months ahead of time (they are listed in your syllabus). Missing an All Call will result in a grade deflation.

**Clean Up:** Each class will end with Clean Up. A rotating schedule will be posted notifying every one of their cleanup duties. Your grade will suffer if you fail to participate in Clean Up!

**Lab Sheets:** Lab sheets can be found in the lab book. Lab sheets must be filled out each time you complete lab hours. The shop foreman, the instructor or a costume major must sign off on your lab hours before you leave the costume shop.

**Quizzes, Midterm and Final Examination:**

Class Examinations will cover assigned reading, lectures, and handouts. It is essential that students keep up with the reading as detailed in the Syllabus. Quizzes will cover all material prior to the midterm and Final Exam. The Midterm will cover the all information for the first half of the semester and the final will only cover the information from the midterm to the end of the semester.

**Final Project:** Your final project is a garment you will construct yourself for yourself. You, not the shop, will provide all the necessary material needed to create your final project. The instructor must approve the fabric, design, and pattern selection. The garments will be modeled in a fashion show on the last day of class. All work must be done in the costume shop, so manage your time wisely.

**Academic Integrity Policy:**

You are expected to honor the Academic Integrity Policy as stated in the Student Resource Guide. All work is considered pledged and to be your own.

**Evaluations:** You will be given the opportunity to evaluate the class and the instructor at the end of the semester either on a standardized form or by a written summary. You will also be given an evaluation of your class progress shortly after midterm time.

**REMEMBER:**

**Make everyone happy - Come to class on time.**

**Do your assigned work, on time.**

**Leave your personal problems outside the classroom.**

**Work hard. Be cheerful.**

**Remember! We are all working toward one common goal –**

**☺☺☺EXCELLENT THEATRE.☺☺☺**

## ***The Class Calendar***

### ***January 18<sup>th</sup> through May 3<sup>rd</sup>***

(This calendar is subject to change)

#### **Wee k 1**

- 1/18/05 Introduction: syllabus, assign baskets, tour shop  
Read Chapters 1 and 2.
- 1/19/05 Begin Hand Sewing Sample: Basting, Backstitch, Prick stitch
- 1/20/05 Hand Sewing Sample: Blind Hem, Whip, Swing Tack,  
hook and eye
- 1/21/05 Hand Sewing Sample: Labels, button, and snap, finish sample

#### **Week 2**

- 1/24/05 Lecture Chapters 1 and 2  
Finish Hand sample: Hand Sample Due
- 1/25/05 Quiz Chapters 1 and 2  
Introduction to Sewing Machines: Begin Machine Sample  
Seam, Zig Zag, Serger, Flat Felled
- 1/26/05 Machine Sample: French Seam, ShirtTail, Zipper
- 1/27/05 Machine Sample: Dart, Gather, Buttonhole
- 1/28/05 Read Chapters 4 and 5 for Monday.

#### **Week 3**

- 1/31/05 Class Lecture and Discussion: Chapter 4 and 5  
Finish Machine Sample, Sample Due
- 2/1/05 Quiz: Chapter 4 and 5

2/2/05	Shirt Construction: Pattern Layout and Cutout
2/3/05	Shirt Construction: Collar, Cuffs, and Pocket
2/4/05	Shirt Construction: Shirt Front, Pocket to Shirt, Back and Yoke

#### Week 4

2/7/05	Class Lecture and Discussion: Theatre as Collaboration Paper Assigned
2/8/05	Shirt Construction: Yoke to Shirt, Collar to Shirt
2/9/05	Shirt Construction: Sleeves and Sleeves to Shirt Body
2/10/05	Shirt Construction: Side Seams, Cuffs to Sleeves, and Shirt Hem
2/11/05	Shirt Construction: Buttons, Buttonholes and Final Press Shirt due at end of class

\*\* All Call Sunday, Feb. 13<sup>th</sup> 11:00 am to 5:00 PM

#### Week 5

2/14/05	Class Lecture and Discussion: Costume Design Discussion of <i>Metamorphosis and Civil War</i> Begin Production Work
2/15/05	Quiz: Costume Design and Theatre as a Collaboration Begin Production Work
2/16/05	Production Work
2/17/05	Production Work <i>Metamorphosis</i> opens
2/18/05	Lab Work      Read Chapter 6 for Monday

#### Week 6

2/21/05	Class Lecture and Discussion: Chapter 6 Production Work
2/22/05	Quiz: Chapter 6      Production Work
2/23/05	Production Work
2/24/05	Production Work
2/25/05	Lab Work

#### Week 7

2/28/05	Production Work
3/1/05	Production Work
3/2/05	Production Work <i>(SETC Begins)</i>
3/3/05	Production Work

3/4/05      Lab Work

### **Week 8**

3/7/05      Class Discussion: Midterm Review  
                  Production Work  
 3/8/05      Midterm Exam  
                  Production Work  
 3/9/05      Production Work  
 3/10/05     Production Work  
 3/11/04     Lab Work

March 13 through March 20: Spring Break!

### **Week 9**

3/21/05     Production Work  
 3/22/05     Production Work  
 3/23/05     Production Work  
 3/24/05     Production Work  
 3/25/05     Production Work  
                  Read Chapter 7 for Monday

### **Week 10**

3/28/05     Class Discussion: Chapter 7  
                  Production Work  
 3/29/05     Quiz: Chapter 7 and Production Work  
 3/30/05     Production Work  
 3/31/05     Production Work  
 4/1/05      Last Day for Lab Work !!!  
                  Read Chapter 8 for Monday

All Call: Sunday, April 3, 2005 - Remember Daylight Savings!!!!

### **Week 11**

4/4/05      Production Work  
 4/5/05      Production Work  
 4/6/05      Introduction to Final Project: Karl's Lecture  
 4/7/05      Introduction to Final Project: Karl's Lecture      *Civil War Opens*  
 4/8/05      Fabric Store Trip  
                  Read Chapter 8 for Monday



**Week 12**

4/11/05 Discussion: Chapter 8, Final Project  
4/12/05 Quiz: Chapter 8, Final Project  
4/13/05 Final Project  
4/14/05 Final Project  
4/15/05 Final Project  
Read Chapter 9 for Monday

**Week 13**

4/18/05 Collaboration Paper Due, Class Lecture and Discussion: Chapter 9, Work on Final Project  
4/19/05 Final Project, Quiz: Chapter 9  
4/20/05 Final Project  
4/21/05 Final Project  
4/22/05 Final Project  
Study for Final

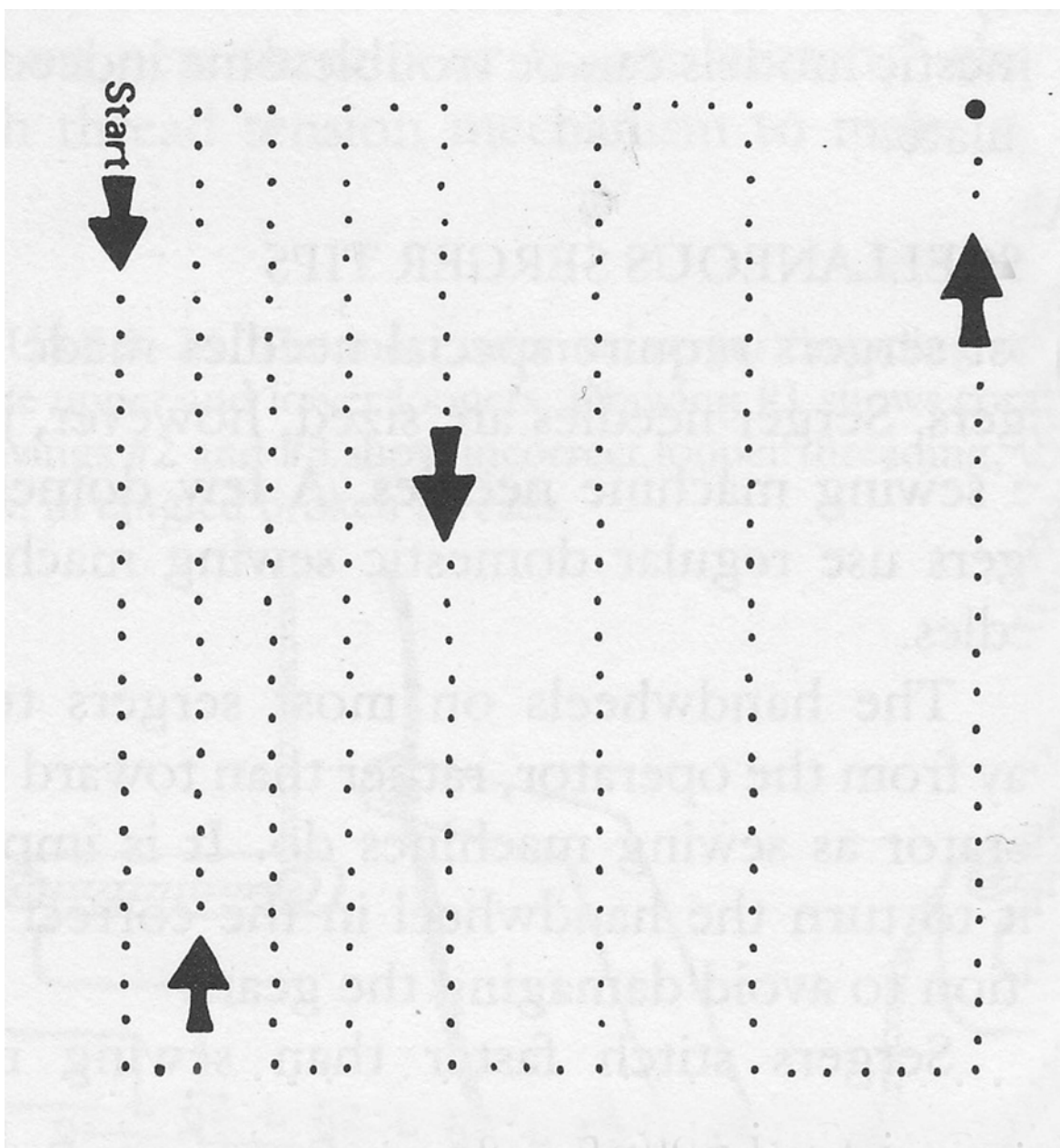
**Week 14**

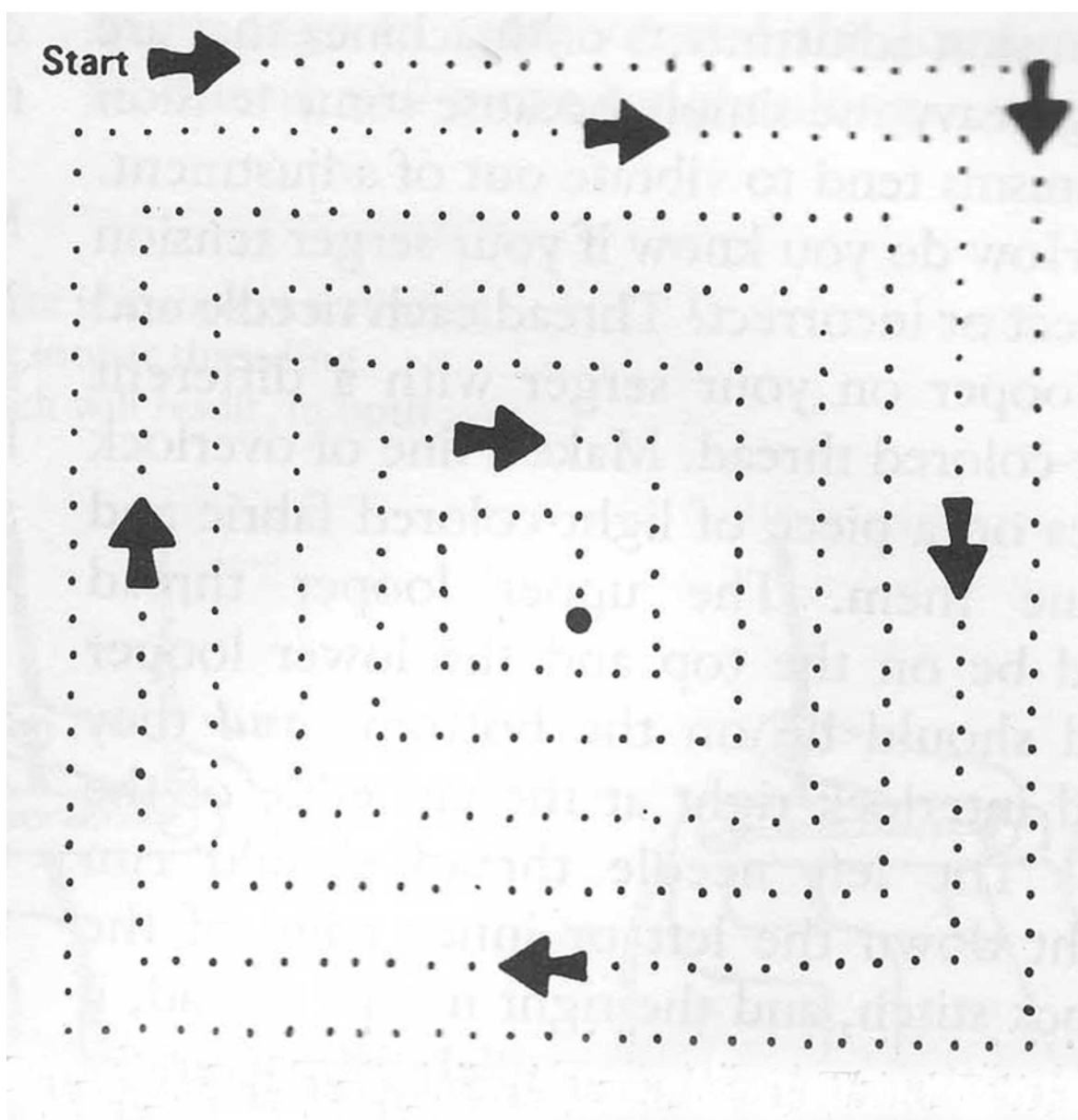
4/25/05 Final Project, Revue for Final  
4/26/05 Final Exam, Final Project  
4/27/05 Final Project  
4/28/05 Final Project  
4/29/05 Final Project, Project Due

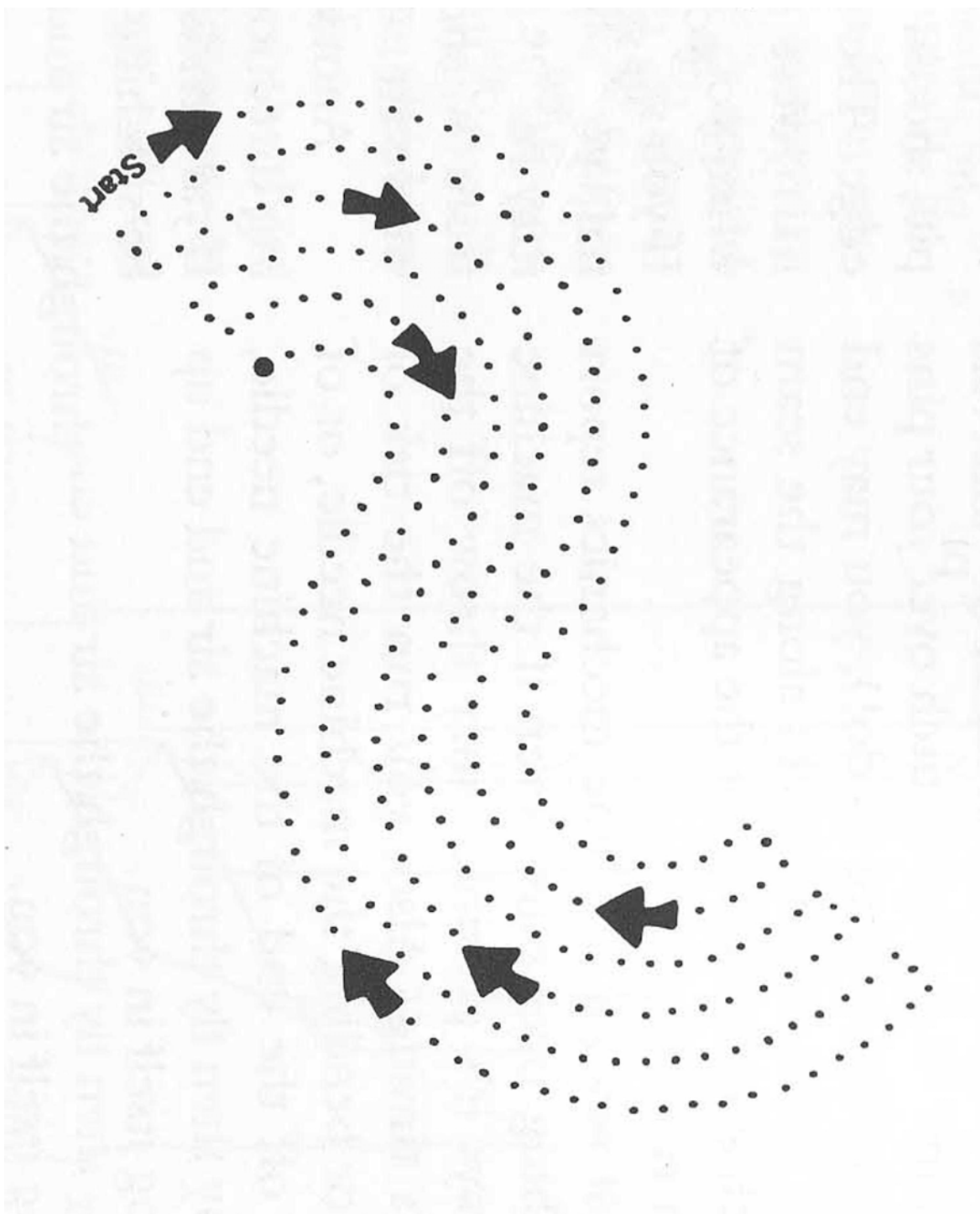
**Week 15**

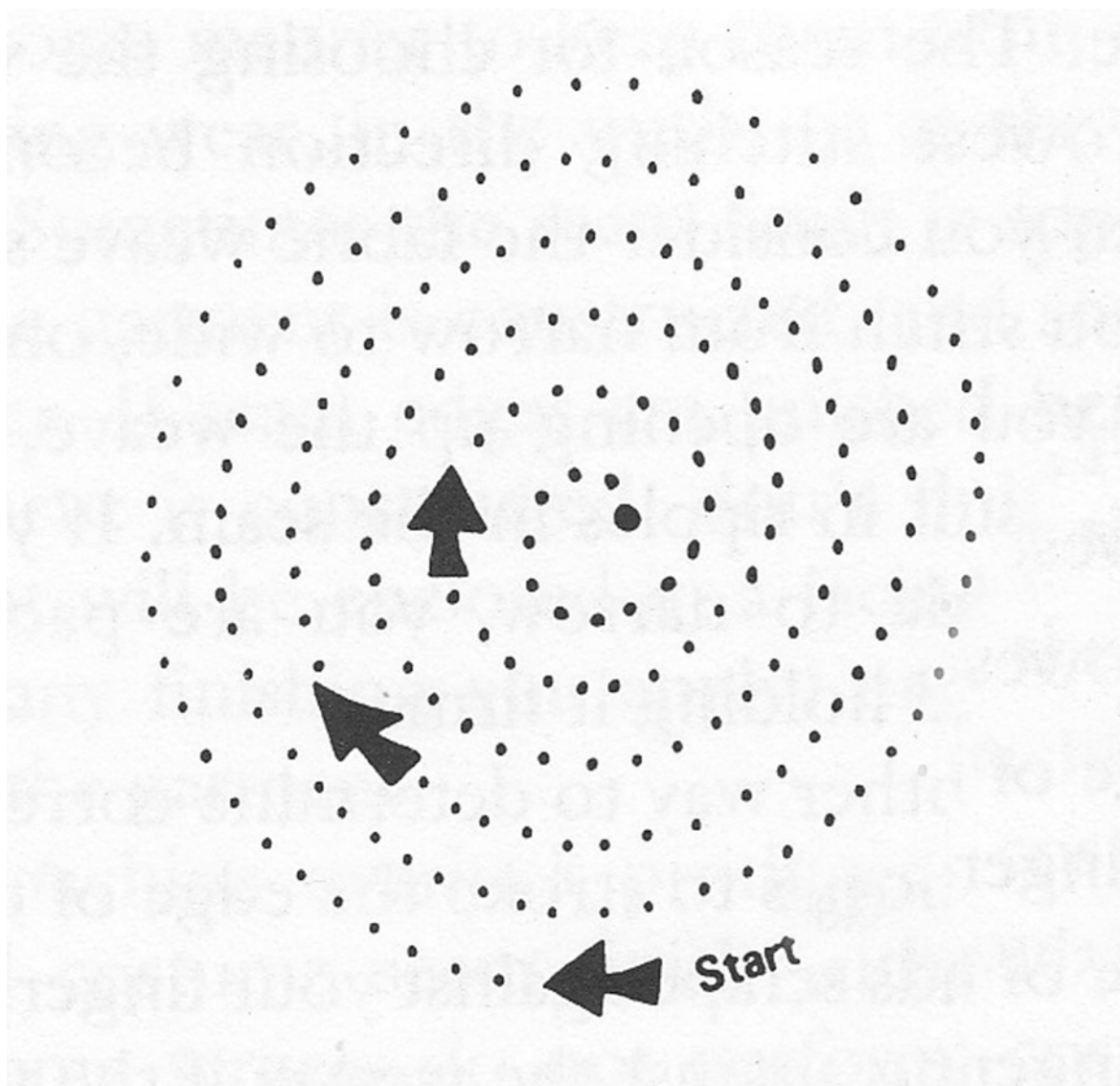
5/2/05 ALL Clean, Fashion Show rehearsal 3:30 PM  
5/3/04 Fashion Show and reception

## **APPENDIX B**









APPENDIX C





## VITA

Heidi Dawn Ortega (Caldwell) was born in Salt Lake City, Utah on June 21, 1974. She received her BA in Fine Art with an emphasis in Pottery and Photography and a minor in Theatre from Westminster College, SLC Utah. Her MA is in Theatrical Design and Production focusing in Costume Design and Technical Direction from Humboldt State University. MFA in Costume Design was received from Virginia Commonwealth University. In her undergraduate years she received many technical theatre awards and was pleased to have her artwork shown in galleries and purchased for private collections. She spent a year abroad working at the International School of Beijing as a Kindergarten Teaching Assistant. In China, she was able to see her first costume designs realized and performed in by the Peking Players. While in Northern California she produced many designs for Redwood Curtain Theatre and was selected by her peers to be the Vice President of the student chapter of the United States Institute for Theatre Technology (USITT). While in Virginia she has designed for Dim Sum Dance in both costume design and the creation of a 3 foot tall soft puppet. She completed many costume commissions including an eighteenth century gown for the first runner up in the Junior Miss Scholarship Competition, and was asked to be the guest costume designer for Wofford College's production of Much Ado About Nothing. She has had her photographs published in the two most recent editions of Poictesme VCU's literary magazine. Since coming to Virginia in July of 2006, Heidi has worked as an educator, costume designer, and custom clothing



designer. She was granted a Graduate Teaching Assistantship at VCU and her research has been presented at the Mid-America Theatre Conference 2008. Amongst her teaching experience at VCU were courses in Costume Construction, Introduction to Public Speaking, and Public Speaking for Business Professionals. After graduating in May 2008, Heidi will be moving to Murray KY and continuing her artistic endeavors as the Assistant Professor of Costume Design at Murray State University.